

Cultural Margins in Borges: Mimesis, Autobiography and Catastrophe

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## Cultural Margins in Borges: Mimesis, Autobiography and Catastrophe

*La proliferación de comentarios sobre la obra de Jorge Luis Borges está señalada por una doble dificultad. Por una parte, la recepción de Borges está polarizada, entre una crítica de su obra (basada en su apoliticismo, eurocentrismo, etc.) y una celebración de la misma (como obra universalista, posmodernista, etc.). Por otra, hay la persistente imposibilidad de identificar o articular el “sistema” borgeana, que parecería dar lugar a una recepción tan diversa. Es decir, una gramática y una retórica, o la relación al lenguaje que sucede en Borges, y que, siempre en exceso a lo que el autor habría querido decir, marca el límite de su texto, el punto donde termina o deja de hablar. Ese punto liminal es también, y especialmente en Borges, el punto al cual el texto siempre e inaudiblemente vuelve. En este artículo, pues, postulo primero que la crítica contemporánea sobre Borges frecuentemente no capta ese punto decisivo. Tras una elaboración de lo que está en juego – lo que denomino el límite de Borges – recurro a un ensayo de Ricardo Piglia que, por un lado, intenta señalar esa dificultad y, por otro, trata de mediar entre dos discursos en conflicto, y ofrece una lectura fundamentalmente diferente.*

The history of commentary on the work of Jorge Luis Borges is marked by a persistent resistance, which manifests itself in the difficulty or impossibility of identifying and documenting a Borgesian system (a poetics, a grammar, a rhetoric, and also a philosophy), and likewise in the problem of delimiting a field and an application with respect to Borges' text, of assessing its standing with cultural, national and socio-political concerns. With respect to these difficulties, there are two prevailing tendencies in reading Borges: 1) the tendency to critique, devalue or even dismiss him, on the grounds of a self-evident Eurocentrism, in light of his conservative political statements or on the basis of a supposed lack of political relevance (identified in the author's refusal to provide a political context in or for his stories, and his insistence on the textuality of any and all context), and finally his silence with regard to issues of Argentine or Latin American specificity or communality (and here the devaluation consists in a

deprivation: Borges is not Argentine enough); 2) from the other pole, a prevailing tendency to celebrate Borges as a writer of the universal who is – again – essentially indifferent to a particular question of origin and community (whence, it seems, his “universal” applicability and appeal). This latter assessment continues to allocate Borges’ text to broadly defined categories (mystical, fantastic, escapist) while refusing, or finding itself unable, to address the specificity of Borges’ subject matter, which may indeed appear to be universal in scope, but which also never ceases to return upon and re-articulate the question of a particular. In either of these common readings, Borges’ text could be said to be essentially reducible to an ideal notion of translation, or a movement between the particular and the universal: as either absolutely impossible or absolutely possible, and in both cases entirely devoid of any remainder or play of difference.<sup>1</sup>

It is possible, however, that this traditional interpretive and discursive difficulty is neither an accident nor a manifestation of the inevitable shortcoming of all inquiry. Rather, it might be thought as a necessary *impasse*, fundamental to Borges’ *œuvre* itself (an entity which, moreover, could never be fully disengaged from its history of receptions). In this sense, such an *impasse* does not merely mark the end of commentary, the point of maximum hermeneutic extension; it also represents a unique possibility of and for criticism – and perhaps the *only* site from which there can be reading at all. This essay, then, will be divided: between a study of Borges and a reading of commentary on Borges, and then again between the multiple possibilities that Borges’ text seems to offer for theory. The first half of this analysis is devoted to a reading of the short story “El Zahir,” with the suggestion that this text speaks from the locus of a limit (for example, from between the two critical positions enumerated above), and that it articulates – and also is overtaken by – a notion of relation that would lend itself to rethinking the question of Argentine specificity (precisely the point on which Borges is rebuked – or congratulated – for having dismissed it). In the second section I will turn to a short commentary by the Argentine novelist Ricardo Piglia (“Ideología y ficción en Borges”), which addresses this same discursive rift with regard to Borges by way of reading between genres (between, specifically, the fictive and the autobiographical), and thereby drawing out a movement at work in Borges’ text, between the rhetorical figures for which he is renowned and an ideological tendency which will become decisive for Piglia’s strategy of reading. While Piglia clearly intends to resist the specific ideology at work in Borges’ self-commentary – which is perhaps in part a nascent demagoguery, and which is certainly on one level a glorification of the patriarchal ordering of society – the essay maintains itself in a mode of questioning and reading (and not of critique), patiently teasing out the double movements (between genres, etc.) which constitute Borges’ *œuvre*.

What is at stake, both in Borges' short story and in Piglia's "response," is an understanding of *text* as always exceeding any attempt to describe and control movement, and thus as already different from itself at the moment of its constitution. It is not a matter here of redeeming the figure of Borges, or of pitting a text and its truth against the possibility of misreading. Rather, the text is only what happens to the work when it leaves the hands of Borges, as the difference or vacillation between the particularity of its authorization (it is written by Borges himself, in Argentina, etc.) and the universality of its legibility and iterability. What is at stake, then, in and around this critical or discursive *impasse* is not the text's truth, guarded and concealed within its pages – as what Borges intended to say but could not, or what he needed to say but did not – but rather what might be termed a limit of Borges, or a Borgesian limit. A point "within" Borges that remains unassimilated and "beyond" the grasp of theory (or any attempt to theorize about it), and which continues to motivate the text even as it eludes the critical axes of discovery.

The narrative of "El Zahir" clearly offers itself to be read as an allegory.<sup>2</sup> The specificity of the plot – of the narrator's obsession with, or being possessed by, the Zahir – is otherwise reduced to the merely fantastic, to the reiteration of a banal dichotomy of reality vs. fiction. But the strange difficulty of the text first announces itself by way of this same demand for allegory: the referential structure or signified that is presumed to be concealed in the text is in fact a simulacrum, and the allegorical function is thus both self-referential and doubly impossible; it is a self-negating account of the impossibility of narration, an articulation of the inability to articulate, remember and mourn a lost or deceased subject. Remaining at the level of the signifier, the narrative is always one step ahead of its interpretation, which it thus appears to have anticipated. This is neither a theology nor a mysticism: the narrative movement or *dirección* (direction or address) bifurcates seemingly to infinity, and in doing so it both insinuates a symbolic, interpretive structure and continually defers the privileged point that would fix each and every point on the circumference. The implementation of a critical methodology, a specific and specialized strategy of reading (e.g. psychoanalytic, phenomenological, etc.) is both called for and, at the same time, overwhelmed and made obsolete by the ceaseless displacements which constitute the narrative. In "El Zahir" it is this very staging of a critical apparatus – which functions as a password, necessitated by the text as a condition of legibility – that in turn enacts a displacement within the text of the ostensible object of theory, an always imminent determination which suddenly appears to have been residing somewhere else. But this cycle of displacement also re-articulates, at the same time, the demand for theory: for theory itself as a critical apparatus, as the response to a perceived interpretive void or gap in the text (the appearance of which could be said to function ontologically by producing an anxiety and a demand for resolution); and also for a particular theory, for that

theoretical discourse or insight among others which would finally unbind the textual knot and so assert itself as dominant. Every theoretical suspension or failure in turn reactivates the demand for more theory, and the accumulation and propagation of theories might be seen as an infinite project of postponement: the disavowal of the *end* of theory – which is nothing other than the death of the subject of knowledge – through the production and competition amongst discourses. (A missed encounter between two theoretical discourses, then, might in fact serve to obscure the more radical finitude at work in theoretical space as such.) Borges' text thus calls for an infinite and interminable reading. It seemingly lends itself to, and equally withdraws from, any conceivable methodological apparatus – which is also to say that there can be no privileged point of entry into the narrative, that its idiom cannot become in the last instance psychoanalytic, philosophical, post-colonial, etc. This narrative movement, then, cannot be followed as the shifting back and forth of a single, continuous thread: rather, it composes a baroque, polyphonic weave which not only invites and draws in a multiplicity of analyses, discourses and readings, but which, in the same warp, also pulls the carpet out from under the very interpretive, hermeneutic space it opens up. Multiplicity, as encountered in "El Zahir," is not a totality or a plurality of unities; it is the space and the gathering of an interminable displacement.

The text of "El Zahir" marks an *impasse* on more than one register. The story is, on the one hand, a narrative about resistance: a testimony of the impossibility of remembrance, of the inability to mourn, of the insufficiency of all acts of naming, and so on. The narrative subject, "Borges," is both constituted and radically unsettled at the site of this impossibility.<sup>3</sup> And the traumatic character of the Zahir is not reducible to its sudden appearance and its singular inexplicability, as if the narrator's abject state could be explained in terms of an existential pathos or a tragic misfortune. Rather, the traumatization of the narrative subject is enacted through and across a relation of repetition: first, through his possession of the coin and subsequent inability to forget its figure; and then again – opening onto a different semantic level of trauma – when he diagnoses his own pathology in Julius Barlach's encyclopedia of Zahir. At this point the traumatic effects of the Zahir (the coin itself has been spent) are carried out through a kind of self-analysis: it is the recognition of the ontological status of the Zahir – a negativity, a gap held open by a signifier, a gap that is revealed to have always already been in place for the subject – which retroactively names the traumatic event as such. The Zahir appears to "Borges" as the instance of an eternal return: that is, as both singular and universal. It is not so much that this instance recalls him to a prior catastrophic experience (such as Teodelina's death) as it is that the Zahir itself *is* this traumatic kernel in so far as it refuses to take its place in a symbolic system. And thus the Zahir also functions as a trope: as a (cata)strophic (re)turn, which both overturns the ordering of a world and,

at the same time, introduces what Maurice Blanchot, in his essay “Two Versions of the Imaginary,” terms “a relation between here and nowhere” (Blanchot 81). It opens – no matter how catastrophic, and indeed precisely *through* its catastrophic character – onto the other side of this limit or over-turning.

If the narrative describes the fundamental status of resistance in the constitution of identity, on the other hand it also functions *as* a resistance, and it performs (or simulates) each of its possible objects or *topoi*: the movement of the narrative is carried out through a series of evasions, an elaborate refusal of comprehension or of the stability and self-sufficiency of any theoretical particular.<sup>4</sup> It should be emphasized, then, that the status of this *impasse* is itself never fully resolvable: it remains constitutive (of the subject and of the narrative) and it continues to problematize the logic of these constructions, to traumatize the narrator through the fact of narration (and its impossibility), and so on.

The motif of the archive has figured prominently in recent attempts to theorize a space of Latin American literature, and serves as one attempt to remark this literature’s difference.<sup>5</sup> Any number of Borges’ texts could lend itself easily enough to a thought of the archive, as introducing the site or space of an accumulation and sedimentation of texts, and likewise as posing questions of memory, dissemination of knowledge and power, and the like. Specifically, the Borgesian motifs of the library and the labyrinth would extend and perhaps complicate the standardized reading of the archive as it appears in Roberto González Echevarría’s *Myth and Archive*.<sup>6</sup> And while a number of other texts – such as “La biblioteca de Babel,” “La lotería en Babilonia” or “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” – present themselves as overt meditations on the labyrinthine character of the text, the reticence of “El Zahir” (and it is not limited to any single topos such as “archive,” for that matter) should not be cast aside. In the introduction of the Zahir as a traumatizing figure and as an emblem of a literary history of fascination, appropriation and madness (and this point would also mark the narrative’s essential difference from “El Aleph,” with which it is frequently equated), it becomes possible to pose the question of the archive without reducing it to a theoretical object.

As suggested above, the narrative of “El Zahir” has been identified with a number of Borges’ other stories (such as “El Aleph” and “La escritura de Dios”); the common gesture at work in these texts is that of condensation, of the universal and infinite into the singular and finite. The similarities between these *historias* has been remarked by a number of commentators, and particularly apropos of this motif of condensation. But what has not been sufficiently articulated (although Daniel Balderston’s *Out of Context* is no doubt an attempt to do so) is the relation between this motif of condensation, which could perhaps be taken as emblematic of a Borgesian dialectic, and a question of spatio-temporal relations in general. In general: that is, for the issue of a *space* of Latin America – the space of the *socius*, and of a political, communal and literary event

– which could only be thought, if we are to follow Borges' gesture, by way of such an economy of tropes: of the general and particular, of the condensations of metaphor and metonymy. In what follows I develop a rough sketch of what such an approach might look like. My reading of "El Zahir" will now draw upon a series of figures found more explicitly in Borges' essays "El escritor argentino y la tradición," "Nueva refutación del tiempo," and "La esfera de Pascal."

Two of the narrator's remarks in "El Zahir" begin to suggest a juxtaposition of the universal with the particular. His first thought upon receiving the coin is its resemblance to other coins, which marks the capacity of a particular coin to evoke a history of real and fictive coins: "Pensé que no hay moneda que no sea símbolo de las monedas que sin fin resplandecen en la historia y la fábula. Pensé en el óbolo de Caronte; en el óbolo que pidió Belisario ..." (590–91). The repetition of the associative "pensé" evokes a frequent characterization of Latin America as a cross-road and as the site of an unprecedented cultural hybridity; and, according to one reading of this *mestizaje*, the particular (Latin American) element retains or is marked by a richness that vastly exceeds the locality of its confines, and which continues to recall the others or the otherness from which it is constituted. But while the narrator's litany might appear to claim a capacity to work and signify within the totality of a symbolic field (any element of which contains echoes of and necessarily points to or brings along the others in its network, thus ensuring historical continuity), such a reading is irrevocably complicated when the statement is articulated through a double negative: *no hay moneda que no sea símbolo*. Here the double negative problematizes the ordering capacity of the Zahir and of the particular, and does not subsequently offer the possibility of closure and resolution by way of a causal construction. Relation here is reflexive, but it does not offer itself to the specular constitution of a subject (which is otherwise "behind" any and all economy of signification and supplementation, as the two work to guarantee one another reciprocally). And thus the question of resemblance, in which the two points of comparison are in need of a third term, does not resolve itself (i.e. assimilate and sublimate its third term) in fixing each of its poles. The constative rhetorical inflection of the narrator's statement – a double negative wanting to imply absolute certainty: beyond all doubt there can be no coin that is not a symbol of all others – thus also functions performatively by casting a radical doubt upon the subject's capacity to control this very movement that would authorize his mastery.<sup>7</sup>

A second remark underscores the manner in which the Zahir functions as a synecdoche, circulating as the condensation and materialization of the universal: "... pensé que nada hay menos material que el dinero, ya que cualquier moneda (una moneda de veinte centavos, digamos) es, en rigor, un repertorio de futuros posibles. El dinero es abstracto, repetí, es tiempo futuro. Puede ser una tarde en las afueras, puede ser música de Brahms ..." (591). Here the associative possibilities of the archive are turned, and the universal is specified as both

futurity (or perhaps the future perfect) and negation. On the one hand, this equation characterizes another well-known representation of Latin America: a significant number of theorists (a diverse group including Rodó, Martí, Reyes, Lezama and others) have attempted to describe, inaugurate and name Latin America in terms of a *potens*, thereby remarking amidst their differences a fundamental relation between the space of socio-political development and language.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, however, this second assessment of the coin's abstract futurity introduces a notion of the universal as a form of negation. While the emphasis on futurity underscores process, becoming and the deferral of any immanence, the notion of abstraction suggests an ongoing displacement of and within the particular of its very particularity – which, as the claim of identity, always remains dependent upon a difference and a correspondence, reverberation or anaphora at work between past (or future) and present. The figure of an impossible or paradoxical condensation of the universal into the particular is not to be thought quantitatively (stuffing a larger thing inside of a smaller one); on the contrary, it has to do precisely with a qualitative and active incompleteness with regard to the constitution and stability of the particular.

What, then, is the status of this abstraction? For one, it could be understood in opposition to the concrete. But the notion of abstraction also refers to a formulation or a construct – the representation of a particular, that is – which fails to think its own essence, or whose essence is “outside” of the space to which it assigns itself or which it designates as its own. In this respect the narrative ascribes this abstraction to money in contradistinction to the coin itself; or rather, money is abstracted to the extent that one conflates it with the coin (representing money as an object) and thus fails to think money as a relation: of expenditure, exchange and repetition. And what is more, if the idea of futurity calls upon a theoretical trope, the *potens*, in order to characterize Latin America as such, this assessment of abstraction can likewise force a rethinking of the stakes of any socio-political particular: as both possibly abject – devoid of immanence, unable to actualize itself as a Self – and also as more than itself, as already imbued with the axes of relation, influence and contamination at the moment it becomes possible to think the particular as such.

The enigmatic conclusion of the narrative of “El Zahir” seems to suggest something along these lines: “Para perderse en Dios, los sufíes repiten su propio nombre o los noventa y nueve nombres divinos hasta que éstos ya nada quieren decir. Yo anhelo recorrer esa senda. Quizá yo acabe por gastar el Zahir a fuerza de pensarlo y de repensarlo; quizá detrás de la moneda esté Dios” (595). The passage turns on a fundamental ambiguity, in that this *perhaps* both anticipates the end of a negative theology and also marks the limit of this project in its own transcendental signifier. That is, the God which is (perhaps) behind the Zahir or signifier is the supposition that motivates onto-theology as a process, while it



also describes the divine as always impending and to be determined, as the dogmatic (un)grounding of any totalizing system.<sup>9</sup>

The essay “La poesía gauchesca” offers an analysis of a tradition which is often considered to represent Argentina’s national poetry (“gauchoesque” poetry). It enters its meditation by way of an autobiographical anecdote from James Whistler. When asked how much time was needed to finish one of his “nocturne” paintings, Whistler replied: “all of my life.” Borges remarks that the painter might with just as easily have testified to needing the sum total of centuries preceding the moment at which he painted: “De esa correcta aplicación de la ley de causalidad,” Borges continues, “se sigue que el menor de los hechos presupone el inconcebible universo e, inversamente, que el universo necesita del menor de los hechos” (179). What is marked here is an inversion and an elaboration of the dialectical axiom (of the universal in the particular): the universality of relation, which both brings the particular to itself and prevents it from becoming self-sufficient, is itself in need of the particular as the locus of its articulation. Thus the universal is not a totality, and if it can be described as a relation, it must also be thought a limit or a movement of transcendence that is put into play by or with the particular. This crucial inversion marks a notion of the historicity of creation and production that could both be seen to address anew the question of a Latin American or Argentine (and marginal) specificity, and to further modify and perhaps trouble the assortment of autobiographical and self-promotional statements for which Borges is also renowned. Accordingly, the particular, be it a work of art, a subject or even a community or nation, arises and takes place within an historical context, and is from the moment of birth already marked and claimed by its situation: by the labyrinth of citation and imitation, and by the horizon of the moment – which is also to say: by the originary sociality or communality of language itself. But the moment of truth or the historicity of the particular cannot simply be passed onto its context. The thought of historicity which Borges offers us is articulated through a disorientation, through the very chiasmus it attempts to describe. And just as every particular text, work, or subject is already marked or contextualized in its conception, the joining force or *ex-ertion* of this contextualization is also discontinuous and must be continually re-initiated (although an agent could never avail itself of this re-initiation as a project: the return is enacted at the limit of every context, in the exhaustion of its components, in the appearance of new works, and through the movement of *text*). And thus, if exposure to a context or particularization is the condition in which the work comes to itself – it is, so to speak, the price exacted of it (*it takes place*, as we say, and thus it cannot be in a vacuum) – then this context also remains exposed: *to itself*, no less, or to the textuality which circulates through the work. And it is this latter as the limit of the particular which functions here as the *inconceivable universo*, which is neither a totality nor a space without limits, but is rather the *limitlessness of the limit*, that

which arrests the particular in its conception and brings it to the limit. The work (or subject, state, community) cannot exist in a vacuum, but it nonetheless marks the introduction of a kind of disruptive force, the negativity or textual effect that exceeds the work proper, and which bears the trace of the nothingness that is at the work's beginning.<sup>10</sup> What is at stake in Borges' thought of historicity, then, cannot be reduced to the mediation and qualifying effects of historicism. In order to address the reciprocity of this relation (which is also to be found in the paraphrasing of Bruno's "dentro de nosotros más aun ..." [637]) it is necessary to think historicity as an event: as an appropriation and a creation of space.<sup>11</sup> The reciprocity which Borges understands to govern both time and space – both of which occur as events, and neither of which can withstand its own limit, and thus neither offers itself as the ground for a subject and its identity<sup>12</sup> – must likewise enter into any thought of locality, of a particular place and a community.

In a brief essay entitled "Ideología y ficción en Borges," Ricardo Piglia attempts to locate a Borgesian style, a singular inflection or mark which would be articulated in and around a number of questions: that of an authorial *œuvre*, of the familial histories which circulate in the proper name "Borges," and also of one possible account of Argentine cultural development. Piglia traces through Borges' writing two parallel lines or lineages – of a familial/personal and a national history – which cannot finally be rigorously distinguished. He calls attention to "un relato fracturado [y] disperso" (Piglia 3) which most immediately is Borges' autobiographical account of his origin: Borges repeatedly claims for himself the point of intersection of two or more familial histories or *estirpes* (race, stock, strain).<sup>13</sup> But this fractured and scattered relation is at the same time a genealogical account of the events which constitute the Argentine nation and community: the space of Argentina is often characterized as a cross-roads, as the juncture of various influxes, traditions, languages, etc. Argentina comes into existence as a marginal Western state and an *arriviste*; as a cosmopolitan arena it can never become European enough, while as a Latin American nation it simply cannot fall into step with the rest of "nuestra América." It enters into its relation with modernity by opening itself to immigration, contamination, appropriation and debt – the conditions which first make possible the thought of the properly Argentine. In Piglia's essay, then, the point of intersection of these two registers, of the personal and the national, or of the particular and general within an Argentine context, is located precisely in "Borges": in what could tentatively be called the *œuvre* itself, with the stipulation that this "itself" is clearly *more than itself* and could never be neatly divided between literary and non-literary components, or between fiction, essay and autobiography. Piglia describes the connection between text and history in Borges as a paradoxical *relato* (relation or account): it is a singular obsession (for both Borges and Latin American representation in general) which is discontinuous and interminable,

and which preoccupies Borges in his writing, running the length of his work as the attempt to situate a self: “Formado por una multitud de fragmentos, escrito en la obra, perdido en ella, este relato es un lugar de cruce y de condensación. En un sentido pareciera que esa es la única historia que Borges ha querido narrar, sin terminar nunca de hacerlo, pero también, habría que decir sin dejar nunca de hacerlo ...” (3). Here the figure of the *œuvre*, which is also an archive of sorts, functions as a metaphor for *and* a displacement of self (or perhaps it is the *self* which, fully articulated, would guarantee the self-evidence of a text: the literal/figurative question is undecidable here), and the two – self and text – function interchangeably. The play on *terminar* in Piglia’s essay underscores this indecision: it means all at once “to accomplish,” “to terminate or leave off,” and, implicitly, to name (term), and it subverts the telic figure of the author (as the master of his language) at the very moment it arises out of the question of Borges’ goals, intentions and origins.

Piglia in fact begins his reading of Borges by making reference to “una ficción que acompaña y sostiene la ficción borgeana” (3), and the architectural motifs at work here – of a supplement which sustains amidst so many fragments – are not exactly the echoes an immanent unity or transcendent meaning. Rather, this rhetoric suggests the interdependency of the various elements of a style: Borges the universalist, the renowned master of metaphor, paradox, and labyrinth, is also engaged in a reflexive gesture which will somehow articulate a Borgesian style and a Borgesian notion of fiction. Borges’ rhetoric is indeed dyadic and anaphoral; and the introduction of a constative economy of tropes and metaphors is also the initiation of another kind of rhetorical sequence: of oratory, persuasion and the opening of a market, which together comprise the reflexive enunciation of subject.

Although his commentary on this two-faced rhetorical manoeuvre is not exactly a critique, Piglia is clearly concerned with suspending some of the force with which Borges situates himself at the cross-roads of a familial and, moreover, Argentine national history. The concern with demythologizing Borges’ self-portraits – which remain a distinctively Argentine possibility – is also an attempt to identify and check a pervasive patriarchal motif in Borges, one which could easily be characterized as both (phal)logocentric and as proprietary. This should not be misconstrued as an effort to redeem Borges or to save him from himself. To be sure, the object of Piglia’s reading is another reading, it is Borges reading himself *vis-à-vis* Argentina’s situation in modernity; and as such it depends upon a vacillation between the work of ideology in Borges’ self-presentation (for instance, an uncritical and forceful promotion of a naturalized phallo- and Eurocentric order in many of his autobiographical comments) and an equally powerful critique of this same order in the text designated as fictive. To a certain degree, any attempt to right Borges’ wrong on this account would itself run the risk of lapsing into ideology. Borges’ self-commentary could thus be said to open

up an impossible space of reading, one whose object is both referential and performative, and which collapses the distinction between the ostensibly pure spaces of literature and auto-biography. The parenthetical remove of the enunciation (“Yo, Borges ...”), the seeming evacuation of any literary, fictive and rhetorical element, functions as a lure: it offers itself as the spectacle of an extra-literary space. The attempt to appropriate this space, to make it proper and to possess it as one would a truth, is to anticipate getting beyond Borges in order to comment on Borges. This anticipation is itself ironic, especially so in that Borges himself has provided the appropriate instruments.<sup>14</sup>

Piglia suggests that Borges’ fiction is predicated upon a series of originary paradoxes or *impases*, which are sustained and re-turned (or repeated, revolved, and re-trope), but never resolved in the text. And perhaps this assessment would characterize an average reading of Borges; but Piglia’s essay also indicates, by way of a subtle ellipse in its own text, that the *impasse* within – or at the origin of – Borgesian narrative is mirrored or redoubled by another point which seems to be located outside the narrative, improper to the figure of Borges himself or revealing the rhetorical character of what would seem to be most concrete in this comparison. This is perhaps another way of saying that the tropes for which Borges is so renowned as a post-modern writer – specifically the paradox and labyrinth – can never simply be located in the text (and thus cordoned off); rather, this economy or movement returns precisely when one thinks to have located and mastered it. The kernel or nucleus which, according to Piglia, organizes Borges’ text beyond all specificity of plot and theme, and beyond style as it has been typically understood, is not a transcendent force or agent, and cannot even properly be said to precede the work itself. Rather, it is the work’s result or effect, what Piglia calls “un modo de definir las condiciones que, según Borges, la han hecho posible [la obra] y la justifican” (3). The cause or motivation of the text and its writing is an effect of its effects, or what Piglia calls “la ficción del origen”: “La escritura de Borges se construye en el movimiento de reconocerse en un linaje doble” (3). “La escritura de Borges reconstruye su estirpe y esa reconstrucción abre dos líneas conectadas formalmente sobre el modelo de las relaciones familiares” (3).

Two assessments, separated by half a page of text in Piglia’s essay, describe between them an interminable sequence of reciprocal relations, repetitions, chiasma and double binds: between mimesis and *poiēsis*, recognition and projection, fragmentation and totalization; and then again between *armas* and *letras*, various types and *estirpes*, and so on. The Borgesian mirror stage that emerges from between these two passages in Piglia’s essay articulates itself around a central point of undecidability: a point between recognition in another and self-constitution, a point that introduces the series of binds and which will eventually extend itself to comprise the relationality between two poles – that is, to offer itself as the sole possibility of relation as well as the constant displace-

ment of each term in relation to its other (between letters and arms, theory and practice, Old World and New World, and so on). To begin with, the status of the term *escritura* in the two passages mentioned above can be seen to shift from one usage to the next. In the first instance, the figure of writing marks a metonymical condensation of the Borgesian *œuvre*, which constitutes itself by recognizing itself in another, in the complementary strains of Argentine culture and history – with and against which it authorizes itself, but which it also displaces in the very utterance of recognition, thereby making possible and necessary a re-reading of that tradition. And, in the second instance, the figure of writing refers equally to a textuality at work in Borges' text, a movement which could not in any case be mistaken for the work itself. It is this textuality which "reconstructs" a stock or strain (although the referent of the possessive *su* is ambiguous – is it Borges' familial stock? the genealogy of his text and its influences? or even the Borgesian *œuvre* and its familial and paternal relation to Argentine literature?), and thereby opens up a space for, and a way to think together, the various relations that occupy the text of Borges. If these two senses of the term "writing" are distinct, they are nonetheless unthinkable outside of their relation to one another, outside of their redoubling in Piglia's text around the uncanny similarity of the two passages in question (they are at enough of a remove from one another in the text that the reader is arrested, at the site of the second phrase, by a moment of indecision and disorientation). The literal notion of "writing," then, wherein Borges and his text invent his own genealogy in the process of creating and publishing fictions, can only announce itself through the figural usage, in which the enunciation both validates and displaces this double lineage. And this is also to say that it articulates itself *as* this figurality, in that this articulation remains in need of its point of departure and breakdown in the literal. It is insufficient to describe Borges as the product of history, as arriving at the end or culmination of a historical development which is Argentina; and it would be equally disastrous to mistake the status of this familial *invención* (Borges' term) for the intervention of a Subject or the evidence of a relativism. (Borges' notion of invention could also be misconstrued as an insipid equivalency of literature: we each have our own Kafka, our own Borges, etc.)

Piglia's approach to Borges' work as the site of various intersections and interrelations is hardly new.<sup>15</sup> The insight of Piglia's reading resides in his refusal to finally fix the stakes of Borges' *œuvre*, and thus Borges – as subject, as synthesis, as third term, or whatever else – remains the marker of an indeterminate difference and a constant deferral, and of a style of writing which opens a space for history. Piglia's brief essay manages to hold open a space in which the two genres of Borges, the autobiographical and the fictive, are able to play off one another and thus reiterate the *unheimlich* relation between two (opposing) discourses. This ongoing reverberation, which consists of the concurrent movements of reciprocity and deferral at work in the specular moment,

describes an incommensurability of identity: the inability of the text or subject to constitute itself fully, once and for all, in relation to a fixed object or a history, which is also to say an identification “with” or “at” a point of indeterminacy. (It is, as “El Zahir” tells us, precisely this ambiguous mark which introduces the exigency of identification.) The drawing power of this indefinite, archival mark – it is a lure, a traumatic cut and a gap – marks the event of identification as that of a relation that must be thought through the space of the *imago*. Piglia remarks on this thought in the direction of an impossible relation to one’s birth: “La cultura y la clase se vinculan con el nacimiento, y el origen es la clave de todas las determinaciones: en Borges las relaciones de parentesco son metafóricas de todas las demás. En definitiva, ese doble linaje que cruza y divide su obra se ordena sobre la base de una relación imaginaria con su núcleo familiar. La tradición de los antepasados se encarna y la ideología adquiere la forma de un mito personal” (3).

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#### NOTES

- 1 In his preface to *Critical Essays on Jorge Luis Borges*, a selection of North American commentaries, Jaime Alazraki identifies a predictable geo-political character of this division within Borges commentary, situating the dismissive reading in a Latin American sphere and the uncritically celebratory first in French and then in North American circles. At first glance, the difference between these conflicting claims would appear to be ideological in nature: that is, it reflects two entirely distinct understandings of the proper domain of literature, understandings which are guided by or coincide with the political stakes of each position (i.e. relations of power: the West represents itself to itself as the universal, and within this paradigm Argentina functions as a particular space and as margin, framing the West and the centre, even as it is in turn framed). I am inclined, however, to offer a somewhat different reading of this interpretive chasm (which is itself by no means limited to the various receptions of Borges, and which marks in varying degrees the entirety of the Latin American canon): the two opposing assessments outlined above are the reflection or repetition of an eternal debate which resonates within Western philosophy, between the notions and domains of necessity and freedom. In this provisional assessment the two claims would in fact belong together, and could not be seen to articulate their object apart from one another or outside of this antagonistic relation. What appears to be a discursive *impasse*, a missed encounter and the impossibility of dialogue between two fields, is in fact also the condition of possibility for each of these discourses. This point can perhaps be clarified at a later juncture, in the elaboration of a Borgesian dialectic.

- 2 The story line can be summarized as follows: the narrator, named Borges, mourns the death of an Argentine fashion model named Teodelina, with whom he was obsessed (although the relation was probably not reciprocal). The narration, he tells us, will be a recollection of the events that have led to his undoing, his incipient madness. "Borges" recalls that, after attending Teodelina's wake, he went into a bar, ordered a drink and received amidst the change a seemingly unremarkable coin which then took hold of his attention and comes progressively to dominate his psyche. In the course of this recollection we are given various hints as to the coin's status – its appearance is implicitly compared to the corpse's strange visage, and likewise it is associated with Argentina's status as a marginal Western nation – until the coin is named as an instance of an interminable repetition of images which transfix their beholders (this is the Zahir).
- 3 This ambivalence is underscored when the narrator suggests that he will no longer be "Borges" by the time he completes his story: as a testimony, the account is both a constative attempt to describe the subject's traumatization (by the Zahir, by Teodelina's death, and so on), as well as the performative rendering of a decomposition. As Paul de Man would suggest ("Autobiography as Defacement"), the narrative's autobiographical mode does not represent a prior historical phenomenon, as an emulation would an original, but rather it both fixes and displaces the very subject it claims to describe.
- 4 An exemplary instance of the narrative's "resistance to theory" takes place around the narrator's abbreviated reference to analysis in regard to the problem of the Zahir: "El mes de agosto, opté por consultar a un psiquiatra. No le confíé toda mi ridícula historia; le dije que el insomnio me atormentaba y que la imagen de un objeto cualquiera solía perseguirme; la de una ficha o la de una moneda, digamos ... Poco después, exhumé en una librería de la calle Sarmiento un ejemplar de *Urkunden zur Geschichte der Zahirsage* ..." By this point in the text the space for a psychoanalytic reading has already been opened up quite definitively, and the appearance of a psychiatrist does not actually institute a new critical register. Rather, the peculiarities of this passage – the myriad ellipses, the narrator's inability or refusal to fully recount a prior refusal of analysis, etc. – marks the limit of psychoanalysis as a means of engaging the text critically. The moment of naming, at which an implicit password (e.g. the psychoanalytic) becomes explicit and shared, is also an instance of loss and displacement, at which the possibility of totalization (psychologizing the text) is arrested or slips away. And thus a particular reading (a psychoanalytic one, for example) is both called for (or even more forcefully, it is demanded) and also resisted and suspended in its critical force. But the work of resistance does not stop here: what is at work in Borges' text is as much a resistance *proper* to theory as a resistance to the theoretical from some point outside of theory. For instance, the movement of "transference" (in the dual sense of the term: of both the performative and the constative, of a displacement onto the analyst as well as the analysand's naming of desire) articulates itself in this scene of analysis as a resistance of transference itself. The gaps and lacunae of the narrator's autobiographical account function as both the suspension of the theoretical and as

the introduction of another demand placed upon the theoretical, as a repetition of its founding moment or condition of possibility.

- 5 See Roberto González Echevarría's *Myth and Archive*, which to my knowledge is the first study to have formally traced the function of the archive in the construction of the "new world," and which draws upon a number of analyses of the "discursive" construction of the Americas. González Echevarría demonstrates the primacy of various modes of writing – the accumulation of *relatos*, travelogues, juridical and scientific documents, etc. – in the socio-political events that coincide with the invention of Spanish America. I am interested here in elaborating a question which is implicit in his thought of the archive, but which is never fully elaborated (and this may indeed finally extend beyond what González Echevarría intends, and show the archive to be a significantly more radical one than he himself is ready to acknowledge). This question remains implicit, then, in terms of the recognition that any socio-political formation (whether it thinks of itself as the State, as community, or in terms of shared culture and tradition) is always contingent and conditional. Latin America, for example, is informed as both the naming of a relation (regardless of any claims made upon origin and originality, the reference to the "new world" constantly evokes the "old") and as a space, and is thus the product of an invention and not the permanent ground for all potential action. (The same would hold for any geo-political or socio-political intervention.) The figure of the archive issues in part as a call for an unending project of repetition – to name once is never enough – which can be observed, for instance, in the proximity assumed by Latin American literature to its perceived origin, to the founding gestures of the Latin American state. As a discourse on or about Latin America, this literature understands itself as implicated in a double exigency: it is both called upon to preserve a certain Latin American truth (to repeat it and to memorize it, and to keep it available for representation) while, at the same time, this very literary recitation – or its "product" – is being upheld as a distinctly Latin American phenomenon, and as evidence of a Latin American culture or specificity. The wide-reaching influence of twentieth-century Latin American literature, and the immediately recognizable character of many of its productions – e.g. magical realism – serves to create a certain equivalency between the space and truth of Latin America and the event of modern and postmodern fiction.
- 6 For example, by posing a question of relation in which causality and teleology have been radically shaken or entirely suspended (see "Kafka y sus precursores"). In this context the archive (a subset or even the entirety of all precursors, which would be the Western canon itself) is associated with a retroactive determination of identity, or arises as the effect of an act of reading which inevitably reorganizes and makes historical any preceding and associated field. But the radical possibility offered to us in Borges is not the unending identification of simulacra and structures of misrecognition. What is infinitely more thought provoking – and indeed necessary in order to have understood Borges – is the manner in which these simulacra *work*, in the relations to the *real* that



are established by way of the imaginary of these structures. The importance of this point marks, as I am attempting to describe it, a limit of Borges' text.

- 7 This tension between the two functions of rhetoric does not produce an inherent contradiction in the statement that contains them. (The narrator in fact begins his account by proclaiming the movement of difference between the subject of the enunciation and the enunciation of subject, and there is no subsequent and overt attempt to recuperate a self-present subject in the narrative; if anything, the narrative testifies to the inability to mourn the lost subject.) But it might be possible, on the other hand, to read this moment, in which the agency of the subject is radically troubled, and historical knowledge as a literary phenomenon – i.e. the archive – is no longer at the service of a subject, back into another genre of Borges: the autobiographical in general. (This will be developed further in the final section of this paper.) I am suggesting, then, that Borgesian fiction opens back onto a supposedly extra-textual space and allows us to re-read it in relation to this displacement. This is certainly not to dismiss or to claim to have resolved the problematic character of the latter, of Borges' myriad and at times troubling autobiographical statements. But at the same time this version of a "step back" does not allow the autobiographical to continue to function as an absolute value. One of the standard axioms of Borges' autobiographical corpus is his self-promotion, his scarcely-veiled claim to occupy the heart or crossroads of Argentine (and thus post-modern?) literary history. But if this claim to mastery rests in great part upon Borges' vaunted encyclopedic knowledge of history and the history of literature, what does it mean to write the fragmentation of "Borges" (of the subject's will, memory and self-presence) beneath the figure of a coin/signifier which evokes or *provokes* the totality of signifiers?
- 8 The differences between the various intonations given to the term *potens* by different Latin American thinkers would undoubtedly be significant, and the notion of the indispensability and opacity of language is perhaps the last thing some of these thinkers would have in mind. But, regardless of the specific project, this sort of characterization cannot subsequently do away with the ontological value it initially invests in the name: to speak of the *potens* of a place is to remark the ontological limit or "essence" of the thing within its very existence, which itself does not precede the event of its articulation in a symbolic universe. This is perhaps also a reiteration of the first remark in Borges' text, which had already begun to call attention to the primary and ineluctable status of relationality. (Relation remains a choice, to be sure, but it is not a choice made *by* a subject – rather, it is the choice which *will have become* a subject.) Ricardo Piglia, in a commentary that is addressed further below, also raises the question of the status of the proper name when he describes the Borgesian specular image as "cruce de sucesiones y de reconocimiento, de donaciones y de deudas" (Piglia 4). (The term *deuda* refers both to a debt and also to kin or ancestors.) The question of ancestral debt, as that which must be *assumed* (supposed and appropriated) by Argentina in its entrance into modernity, could in turn provide the impetus for a genealogical analysis of this history.

- 9 In his study of Borges (*The Mythmaker*), Carter Wheelock offers an intriguing insight into the passage in which “Borges” receives the Zahir (it is after leaving Teodelina’s wake, when he stops in an *almacén* in which a group of men are playing a game of cards), by reading between “El Zahir” and another text, “La secta del Fénix.” Wheelock refers to an ambiguous passage in the latter text, in which the term *fallo* could indicate a judgment or juridical sentence (the passage is describing the apocryphal communal law of the Phoenix sect), but also evokes its other connotations – a gap or lacuna, or, in a card game, a hand which is void of a particular suit. Similarly, the Zahir could be said to function as the circulation of a missing term, the absent one hundredth name for God, which would both fulfil and annihilate the divine, and which as a gap motivates the sequential and circular function of a system.
- 10 Similar engagements of the relation between creation and history can be found in a number of Borges’ essays. For instance, in “La esfera de Pascal,” in relation to the famous description of universal history as “la historia de unas cuantas metáforas” (636), he paraphrases Giordano Bruno: Bruno conceives of the universe as “efecto infinito de una causa infinita” (637) and similarly refers to a divinity that “está dentro de nosotros más aun de lo que nosotros mismos estamos dentro de nosotros” (637). I would suggest that Borges devotes a substantial portion of his writing to *reading* these two passages from Bruno. For the purposes of this study, the first statement lends itself (apart from its incipient mysticism) to a thought of the universal as negativity, and thus the excessive, differential character of the infinite, which would seem to undergo a semantic shift within the phrase, from one instance to the next. Meanwhile, an echo of the second passage can be found in the story “El Sur,” a text which cannot be addressed here due to other constraints. (I am thinking specifically of the scene in which the protagonist, Juan Dahlmann, is lost in his book while climbing a staircase and cuts his forehead; a woman opens the door for him and he sees written on her face a look of horror which is, finally, the recognition and reflection – between the two faces – of this “in him more than him.” For Lacan, this would be the point around which one falls in love, for example (and we might surmise that a similarly singular event has transpired for the narrator with Teodelina in “El Zahir,” an event which is apparently redoubled at the scene of the corpse). Borges’ reading of Bruno’s remark also seems to understand the divine – that excess within us – as a kind of destiny or “destining”: such is the case with Juan Dahlmann, whose accident is preceded by the comment that “Ciego a las culpas, el destino puede ser despiadado con las mínimas distracciones” (525). This thematization of destiny, then, involves a relation that is both excessive (one does not choose one’s destiny; the appearances are rather that one is chosen by it) and of the imaginary (although this does not simply designate the unreal and fantastic: for Dahlmann, destiny articulates itself through books – whereby he constructs an imaginary relation to the South – and also in the exchange of visibility that characterizes the relation between two people).
- 11 The genitives should be heard doubly. That is, this notion of space functions both as a pure opening (of *poiēsis*, for example) which occurs prior to any

attempt to fill it, and which essentially invites or provokes the event of its being filled by, for example, a work of art or the work of community (and in this sense, the work must find its time and await the space that will usher it into the world). Space thus functions as the finite and discontinuous border or limit which enframes every event, community, etc. In this second sense, space is always occupied and worked – as the space *of* community or creation – in contrast to an ideal, undifferentiated space.

One can identify a corresponding treatment of temporal relations, for instance, in “Nueva refutación del tiempo,” where Borges proposes the radicalization of the Idealist treatment of existence. This would also be the point at which the criticism of Borges’ universalism (i.e. Eurocentrism), and of his seeming refusal of a particular Latin American or Argentine concern, would encounter its limit: while the negation proper to metaphysics would negate the particular (e.g. present time) in order to then negate the whole (Time itself), Borges proposes here to “(rechazar) el todo para exaltar cada una de las partes” (770). The *refutación* essay ends on a note that recalls the enunciative tension of “El Zahir”: “El tiempo es la substancia de que estoy hecho. El tiempo es un río que me arrebata, pero yo soy el río; es un tigre que me destroza, pero yo soy el tigre; es un fuego que me consume, pero yo soy el fuego. El mundo, desgraciadamente, es real; yo, desgraciadamente, soy Borges” (771). I would also offer the possibility that the full impact of this essay cannot be elaborated outside of its textuality: specifically, the inclusion of the lyrical anecdote of Borges’ timeless experience in the suburbs of Buenos Aires, as well as the near duplication that takes place between the first and second parts of the essay.

- 12 This cautionary note would be especially relevant for an analysis of a question of the Argentine in Borges; and it in fact corresponds closely to a criticism offered by Borges of any literature that lays claim to a particular identity by attempting to represent its particularity (i.e. “local colour”). In any case, Borges’ thought of the historicity of space (as singular rather than continuous, but as also already “spacings” or openings) shows the particular to function as a limit, and never as the ground or enclosed place of a self-contained subject or community. It is precisely here, in this difficult thought of the particular, that Borges’ work begins to pose for itself a question of the Argentine: in relation to both the particular and the universal, and at work specifically in a marginal space of the West. This is not to suggest that Borges manages to theorize the Argentine by giving it an identity or that he has somehow articulated the “difference” of Argentina, but rather that this difference is both set to work and also resisted in Borges’ text.
- 13 The paternal lineage (Borges’ father is of Anglo-Saxon descent and introduces him to both the English and German languages, and to the world of literature) is associated with the intellectual faculties and with the *letras* side of Cervantes’ Platonic dyad, while the maternal (his mother’s forebears were Iberians and the dominant figures were apparently uneducated soldiers) corresponds to a heroic ethos of *armas*. It will be readily apparent that these two sides not only together compose an organic totality with head, arms, etc., but that the dyadic character

corresponds to both a patriarchal and a Eurocentric (in which the Anglo-Germanic presides over the relatively marginal Iberian) world view.

- 14 The possibility of ironic repetitions and self-negating criticisms could be extended indefinitely. But it is not my intent to rescue Borges and/or his text from all problematic moments. Rather than collapsing any possible distinction between the literary and the autobiographical (which perhaps mirrors, in a strange manner, the two Borgesian lineages) in order to demonstrate Borges' ideal immunity to criticism, I am only attempting to draw out a point of intersection between the two genres, between the fictive and the autobiographical (as two pre-eminently literary modes, that is), a point at which Borges' self-commentary both refers to and performs its object. And it is only thus, in between these two elements of *letras*, that the Borgesian text enters into its own ambiguous relation with ideology, which it both affirms and critiques (or rather it must be said that the text performs a critique, at the moment it reaches its limit and exhausts all possibility of auto-reflexive enunciation).
- 15 See also, among others, Beatriz Sarlo's *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge*, which underscores the motif of *las orillas* (as both a meeting ground and a marginal space) and Daniel Balderston's *Out of Context*, which attempts to historicize a number of Borges' works while also demonstrating the political space that opens up in them. But the identification of Borges with a figurative cross-roads or even a *mestizaje* of sorts, of which I have only named a couple of commentators, also runs the risk of serving as a generic indicator of Borges' Latin Americanism, playing itself out as a specific re-articulation of a well-known formulation (Latin America as cross-roads, the Latin American as *mestizo/a*). Ortega y Gasset's well-known axiom, "Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia" (which Borges parodies on a number of occasions), would thus have to be subjected to the same radical displacement at work in Piglia's essay in the naming of writing. And thus, in this example, the term of identification, the *yo mayúscula*, would be composed not of itself and its circumstance or experiences, but of the sum of its experiences under the mark or term of something more-than, a *yo minúscula* which determines, but is not subsumed under, the identity of the subject. What remains to be articulated here is the relation between this enunciation of a personal identity and a question of national or communal identity: can the latter be posed as simply an extension or expansion of the paradigm just suggested? Is community, in other words, a function of the impossibility of identity? Or would the stakes be entirely different?

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